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ORIGINAL GLORY

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FOURTH
PRESBY
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Genesis 1:26-31, Luke 15:1-2, 11-24

"You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor."
-Psalm 8:5 (NRSV)

The year is 1948. The place, a courtroom in a small town in Louisiana. The court-appointed public defender is concluding his summation to the jury - twelve white men. The one on trial is a young black man. His name is Jefferson. He is poor, barely literate. He was present when two of his friends held up a convenience store; both of them and the store owner died in the shooting while Jefferson watched. Now he's on trial for murder. He will be convicted. His sentence will be death by electrocution. Everyone knows it.

The public defender makes his final plea:

> "Gentlemen of the jury, look at this — this boy. I almost said man but I can't say man. Oh sure, he has reached the age of twenty-one, but, do you see a man sitting here? Look deeply into those eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence? Do you see anyone here who could plan a murder, a robbery, can plan anything? No gentlemen, this skull here holds no plans. What you see here is a thing that acts on command, a thing to hold the handle of a plow, to load bales of cotton, to dig your ditches. Ask him to name the month of the year. Mention the names of Keats, Byron, Scott and see whether those eyes show one moment of recognition. Ask him to quote one passage from the Constitution.
>
> "Gentlemen of the jury. Be merciful. What justice would there be to take this life? Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this." [p. 7, 8]

That is how novelist Ernest J. Gaines begins a remarkable book, *A Lesson Before Dying*. Using fiction, Gaines poses the most important question anybody ever asked. What does it mean to be a human being?

In the story there are two women in their seventies who know what it means to be human and understand the importance of the question: Jefferson's godmother, who has raised him, and her friend. They persuade the friend's nephew, a young black school- teacher, Grant Wiggins, to visit Jefferson in jail, to help him learn the lesson before dying.

> "'Called him a hog"' the old woman says when they meet for the first time. 'Called him a hog. I want the man to go to the chair on his own two feet.'"

Jefferson won't talk, has totally withdrawn, lies on his bunk staring at the ceiling, won't eat the food his Nanaan — which is what he calls his godmother — sends him, won't even acknowledge the young schoolteacher. When finally, after several visits, he speaks, this is what he says to the teacher:

"You brought some corn? Corn? That's what hogs eat."

And you know in that statement what the issue is and will be.

Wiggins keeps visiting, won't give up because the old woman won't let him, delivers the food she prepares: fried chicken, gumbo, fresh bread, tea cakes. The teacher brings pecans his elementary school children have collected and sent because Jefferson is now a celebrity in the black community; buys Jefferson a radio and finally a notebook to encourage the young man to try to express himself. *A Lesson Before Dying* is a great book, and it eloquently raises the fundamental question — What does it mean to be human?

The theologians have always known that it is a theological question. Both John Calvin and Karl Barth, four centuries apart, wrote that the question of God is also, at the same time, the human question.

In the contemporary marketplace of ideas there are many competing to answer the basic question of human identity. We are products of subconscious drives, formed in us by our relationship with our parents — say the Freudians. No, we really are the result of a pre-programmed D.N.A. structure that leaves no room for individual freedom or choice, say the behaviorists.

What we really are is the most recent product of the survival of the fittest, say the evolutionists: the primate who stood up, picked up a rock to throw at his attacker and developed the capacity to think ahead, to plan, to worry about what's for lunch.

The military answer is body counts — bureaucrats say we are statistical trends. Both Marxists and free market capitalists propose that we are essentially economically determined, consumers essentially, in our case, easily manipulated into wanting and then working hard to buy, purchase, consume, really almost anything, an analysis difficult to contest when you live on North Michigan Avenue.

And in the marketplace there is one more answer. Consider it.

It is expressed in the first story in scripture. Human beings are fashioned at the end of the process of creation, made in the image of God, with dominion over the rest of creation. God fashions them out of the mud of the earth, blows breath into them. And then, something very dramatic happens. God blesses the human beings and addresses them: talks to them. These are creatures capable of conversation, dialogue, relationship. These are beings who think about things, each other, where they came from, what's for lunch, where they are going. These beings can argue back, can fuss, complain, walk out the door on occasion. Human beings are very different beings.

> "What a piece of work is a man!"

Shakespeare wrote:

> "How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In apprehension how like a god."
> [*Hamlet*, Act II, Scene 2, line 317]

And the Psalmist:

> "When I look at your heavens,. . .
> the moon and stars. . .
> what are human beings that you
> are mindful of them. . .
> Yet you have made them a little
> lower than God,
> and crowned them with glory
> and honor."

A little less than God. . . crowned with glory. That is who the scriptural tradition says we are.

The problem is that we forget that — that original glory. Religion ought to remind us, but what religion seems to say most eloquently and forcefully about us is that there is something wrong. We are faulty. . . We're not glorious, we're bad. What is original about us, according to religion, is our sin. Sin defined as pride, egotism, selfishness, thinking too highly of ourselves. Now that is part of our answer to the question, and a very important part. But it is not the only part. What is original about us, according to Scripture, is our glory.

So maybe the basic human dilemma — or error, or sin — is not thinking too highly of ourselves, but not highly enough: forgetting who we are; denying our glory, refusing to exercise the dominion the creator has given us, refusing to be the full, strong, responsible men and women God created us to be.

There are forces in the world which deny our glory. There are realities that demean our humanity.

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There is, for instance, in our culture a sense that you are a full human being only to the extent that you prove yourself to be. There is a sense that you are respected, appreciated, loved even if — you get good grades in school, win, succeed, get ahead, earn a big salary, end up on top; if you live up to expectations of others — which sometimes are helpful and inspiring and sometimes unreal, unreachable and therefore oppressive. It is a conditional kind of love — you get it if you earn it. And when you buy into the idea (and who doesn't?) life becomes a proving ground, a struggle to be good enough, popular, successful enough. Addictive behavior is what results, the therapists are telling us, designed to earn the affection and acceptance and love of others and an inability to be, to accept, to love yourself. The antidote, say the therapists, is steady, unconditional love, love that is based, not on what you accomplish and perform, what you look like, how much money you earn, but on your being, on your original glory.

One of the forces that denies humanity in a tragic way in our culture is aging. Shortly before he died, Professor Joseph Sittler, was interviewed by *Second Opinion*, a journal on health, faith, and ethics, on the topic of aging. He responded by telling about a recent invitation to speak to the residents of a nursing home, recipients of what Sittler, with a twinkle in his eye, called "shuffle-board geriatrics":

> "Keep 'em happy: keep 'em sort of sedated by entertainment: teach 'em bridge or poker: take 'em on bus trips." And then he reflected, "social science misses the inteior aspects of aging: loss of identity, loss of memory, loss of role. The first thing you say to someone after meeting is 'what do you do?' Well, when you don't do anything any longer in American society, who are you? You're the residue of a ruin."

So Sittler, almost totally blind himself, tried an experiment.

> "I remembered them back to identity," he said. "I told them that as I talked about my youth I wanted them to think about their own youth. So I talked about the days when I was a little kid in Southern Ohio. These old people started to cry, but it was not from grief. They went out of the room talking to one another as they never had before. It was a recovery." [*Second Opinion*, July 1993, p. 15]

They remembered who they were. They remembered their original glory.

Physical handicap can be a powerful denial of humanity, as can racism. Cornel West, head of the Afro-American Studies Program at Princeton has written an important new book, *Race Matters*, in which he says,

> "The fundamental crisis in black America is twofold: too much poverty and too little self-love."

West criticizes his own community for buying into self- degrading images of black people and the nihilism, the hopelessness and lovelessness that result. It is a very sobering book to read in the middle of a crisis in public education in our city: the apparent unwillingness on the part of elected officials and appointed officials and union officials to lead with vision and courage and do what sooner or later must be done and that is to find a way to pay, equitably and fairly, for the education of all our children. West writes about the "pervasive spiritual impoverishment, the collapse of meaning in life, the eclipse of hope and the absence of love of self and others. . . which leads to the cultural denudement of urban dwellers, especially children." [p. 5]

And I thought about visiting our Center for Whole Life at Cabrini Green last week, and seeing the children, standing in the dark, cave-like hallway which always smells of urine, and the glass-strewn playground with not one piece of working equipment, and the wire cages which remind me of a penitentiary, to keep them from falling off the balconies, and I was ashamed that this wealthy state in this wealthiest civilization in the history of the world can't find a way to pay for their education. And I thought my church has words for this. . .

"We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone the things we ought to have done. . . O Lord, have mercy upon us."

Or as one of the fathers who attended our town meeting last Tuesday night — an African American parent, said — "if 85% of the public school students were white instead of racial minorities, we'd find a way to open the schools tomorrow." And he was right, of course.

The late Howard Thurman was a famous black leader. An interviewer asked him once how he was able to accomplish so much in the days when racism was written into our laws and was pervasive throughout the whole culture? He said, "My mother kept telling me I was a child of God." [see Elizabeth Achtemaier, *Nature, God & Pulpit,* p. 57]

Original glory. If we are singularly fortunate, we have remembered: we have had mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, lovers and friends who have helped us — sometimes forced us — sometimes simply steadfastly loved us into remembering who we are.

One time Jesus told a story about a young man and his family. This young man, not unlike countless other young men and young women, firmly believes that in order to be himself, to claim his own unique identity as a person, to say unequivocally who he is. . . must make a break, must in essence, reject the identity given to him by his family and community. And so he does something appalling. He goes to his father and says, in effect, "I'll never be my own man until you are dead. And in that you seem pretty healthy and may be around for a while, I'd like the share of the estate which will come to me when you die. I'd like it now. I can't wait for you to die to be me."

This parent loves this child so much - he complies. The young man goes to a distant country which the teller of the story does not identify because "distant country" simply means a place that is not in any way family, community, identity; and he commences to be himself with a vengeance. Things go badly. He loses all his money, becomes essentially a homeless bum. And then, comes to himself: He remembers who he is. And so he goes home and his parents who have never stopped loving him are waiting and his father sees him coming and runs down the road and opens his arms and encloses his child.

That story has been painted and sculpted and choreographed and set to music, particularly that moment of reunion, literally thousands of times. Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen has written a book about it which reflects on Rembrandt's famous painting, The Return of the Prodigal Son, which hangs in the Hermitage, and a fine poster reproduction of which will be part of our Arts Festival exhibit.

Nouwen helped me to understand that the young man's leaving home is much more than a random incident. It symbolizes the personal reality that each of us, in some way, tries to leave home, not simply the necessity of leaving our parental home but our spiritual home as well. Each of us tries to forget that we belong to God, that there is one who loves us and wants us and is waiting for us to remember and to come home.

In Rembrandt's painting, the son is thin, worn, tired, his head is shaven like a prisoner or refugee. Nouwen helped me see that the Far Country is where we go to try to forget who we are: where we listen to voices that sound attractive, seductive, but that drive out the sound of the voice that says, "I love you — you are my beloved daughter — my beloved son."

And Nouwen helped me see a wonderful detail in that great painting. The pathetic son, clothed in rags, kneeling in the embrace of his own father, curiously still has fastened to his waist band, an elegant, rather valuable short sword. This incongruity — he obviously has nothing else to call his own. The sword, says Nouwen, is the symbol of his nobility. "Whatever he had lost, money, friends, reputation, self-respect, inner peace and joy, he had not lost his parents' love. Though he was nothing else — he was his Father's son." [*The Return of the Prodigal Son,* Henri Nouwen, p. 35, 42, 44]

He remembered whose he was.

It is the deepest yearning of your spirit and mine no matter where we have gone, how much or how little we e achieved, how vigorously we have asserted ourselves — there is within each of us a yearning to be what were created to be: God's child, God's son, God's daughter. . . crowned with glory.

The story Jesus told was about a steadfast, unconditional love accessible to every man and woman: to the Pharisees and Scribes; to tax collectors and prostitutes about whom they complained; to CEOs and sanitation workers, young and old; the steady, accepting love of the one who created us.

Jefferson finally comes to himself and remembers who he is. He stammers a "thank you" for the pecans the children have sent. He begins to talk. On the night before he died, unable to sleep, his teeth chattering and heart pounding, he takes the notebook and pencil that Grant Wiggins brought him and writes and writes and writes, and a human being emerges with hopes and dreams and grief and fear and love.

"Good by Mr. Wiggins," he writes. "tell them im strong. tell them im a man."

When the jailer asks him if he has any last words, Jefferson says,

"Tell Nanaan I walked."

Jesus Christ came to show us what a human being looks like.

Jesus the Christ reminds us that we, you and I, have the image of God in us, made a little lower than God, crowned with original glory.

Jesus Christ came to remind you that you are — a man — a woman — loved unconditionally and infinitely by God. That is your glory.

Remember who you are. Never, never forget whose you are.

Amen.